

Civilians get a taste of military life at Camp Fogarty

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EAST GREENWICH — How do you help someone who is suffering from the disturbing psychological effects of war if you have never experienced any aspect of a soldier's life?

Last week 60 civilian behavioral health care professionals tried to answer that question by immersing themselves in military life during two days at Camp Fogarty, the Rhode Island National Guard's training facility on South County Trail.

From physical training at sunrise to shooting military rifles, these new experiences are aimed at helping mental health professionals relate better to their patients who might be suffering from post traumatic stress disorder or other issues.

Dawn-Everlina Cox, a masters-level methadone clinician at Discovery House in Providence, said approximately 25 percent of her 90 to 100 patients, although not just veterans, have some form of PTSD. She said she believes the training will help in her practice.

"Dealing with the military and PTSD, and learning about the traumatic brain injuries and the different things that lead to that, I think it'll be able to help me understand [my patients] more, and they'll be more open to me," she said. "I can speak the lingo, and I understand what's going on."

Cox said that working with military personnel is much different than her usual patients, who are typically homeless and/or addicted to drugs. "This is a strong, employed, moral population," she said. "I just love working with them."

From Thursday through Friday, the health workers from the state Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals, along with behavioral health service providers across Rhode Island and from neighboring states, took part in Operation Immersion. Attendees experienced parts of military life, including receiving platoon assignments at check-in, marching drills, "rise and shine," roll call, physical training, military vehicle convoy training through a simulator, and heard "Taps" before lights out at night.

Program participants also received training directly related to behavioral health, such as substance use disorders and the returning soldier, military culture and PTSD issues unique to soldiers. Servicemen and women shared their stories about deployment and military family members talked about their experiences before, during and after the deployment of loved ones.

John Mitchner, a community service provider for the Providence Center, said the experience gave him a new perspective on PTSD. "We have a better understanding of what they go through," he said. "And you really don't think about the families a lot, because in a lot of cases, you're just dealing with the individual ... The family goes through a whole traumatic experience as well."

Leland Wilcox, a wealth management professional from Farmington, Conn., had different reasons for participating in Operation Immersion. His girlfriend is a sergeant in the R.I. National Guard, and she asked him to attend so he could better understand her own struggles with PTSD.

"I just hope to gain a better perspective on the military culture, and what it is that they go through on a day-to-day basis," Wilcox said.

"Rhode Island has had the second highest per capita deployment rate of the country's 54 states and territories," said Craig Stenning, Director of BHDDH. "As a result, there is a higher incidence of mental health issues [in the state]. Most deployed servicemen and women come back and re-assimilate into the community, but some do not easily return to a civilian lifestyle. It is important for BHDDH and other behavioral health service providers to better understand some of the issues military personnel face in order to more effectively meet their needs."

Operation Immersion was started by the Tennessee National Guard in 2009. Rhode Island is the second state to participate.

Sgt. Stephanie Riotte of the R.I. National Guard said the state's high instance of war-related mental health issues was the driving factor to start this program. "For many of our soldiers, it's not uncommon for them to go on two, three or four one-year deployments as a National Guardsman."

Riotte said returning soldiers face issues not just caused by PTSD, but also from the suffering economy. "Many soldiers, when they come home from a deployment, may not have a job anymore," she said. "It's not just PTSD and [traumatic brain injuries] that we're concerned about. It's their health and welfare, it's their financial welfare, their educational welfare ... We need to care for these soldiers and airmen when they come home."

Riotte also said the R.I. National Guard's Family Assistance Center and Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve do an excellent job of helping returning soldiers and their families, but acknowledged there is always room for improvement. She said that programs like Operation Immersion are an excellent way to improve outreach. "Experiencing our culture hands-on is, I think, a huge help for them," Riotte said.

Another Operation Immersion will be held in spring. To learn more about the program, contact Brenda Amodei at 462-1747 or bamodei@bhddh.ri.gov, or Corinna Roy at 462-0455 or croy@bhddh.ri.gov.